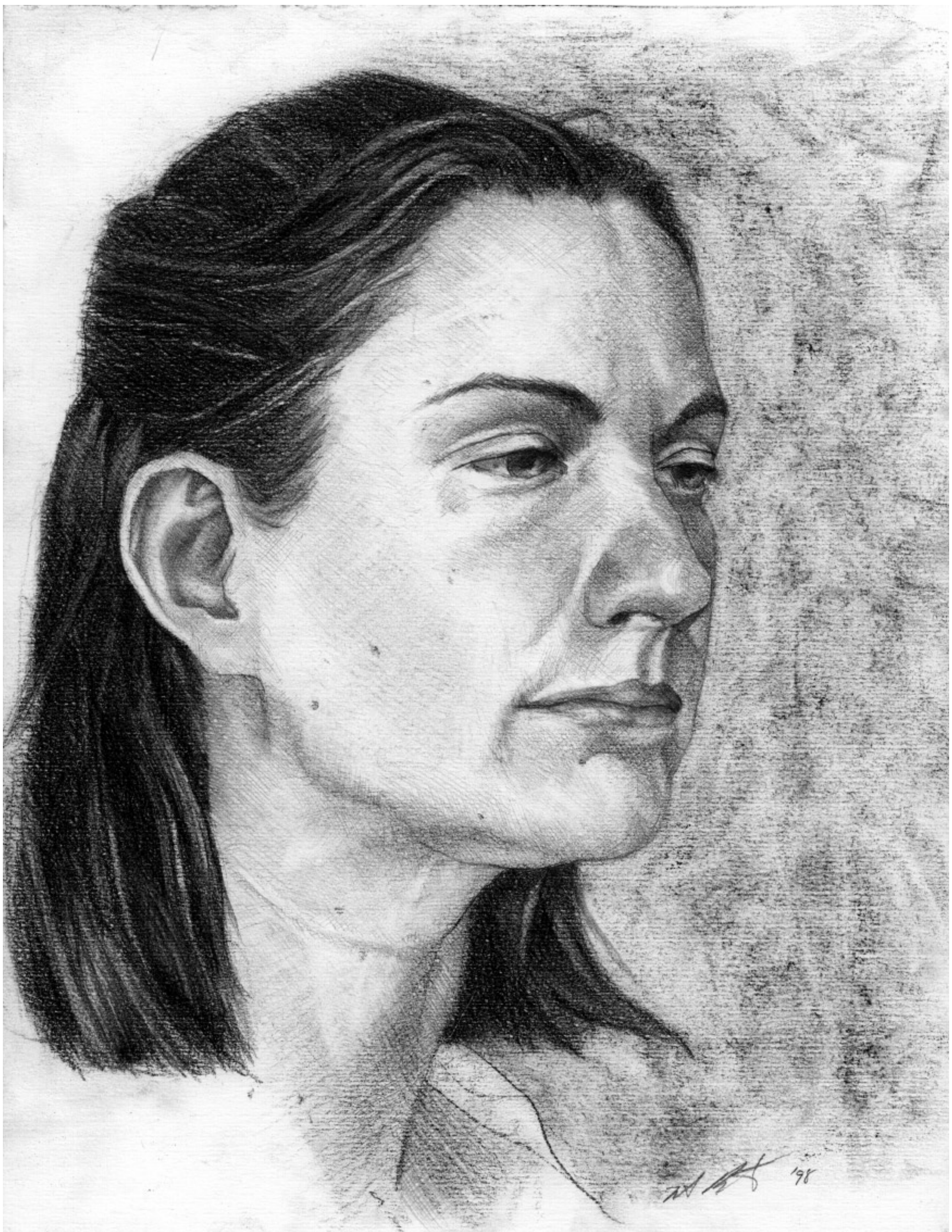
FUNDAMENTALS OF
PORTRAIT DRAWING



MICHAEL BRITTON

2ND EDITION



Character is the essential truth of any natural object, whether ugly or beautiful; it is even what one might call a double truth, for it is the inner truth

… Everything in nature has character; for the unswerving directness of his [sic] observation searches out the hidden meaning of all things. And that which is considered ugly in nature often presents more character than that which is

And as it is solely the power of *character* which makes for beauty in art, it often happens that the uglier a being is in nature, the more beautiful

There is nothing ugly in art except that which is without character, that is to say, that which offers no outer or inner truth.

Whatever is false, whatever is artificial, whatever seeks to be pretty rather than expressive, whatever is capricious and affected, whatever smiles without motive, bends or struts without cause, is mannered without reason; all that is without soul and without soul and without truth; all that is only a *parade* of beauty and grace; all, in short, that lies, is *ugliness* in art

When an artist, intending to improve upon nature, adds green to the springtime, rose to the sunrise, carmine to young lips, he creates ugliness because he lies.

When he softens the grimace of pain, the shapelessness of age, the hideousness of perversion, when he arranges nature — veiling, disguising, tempering it to please the ignorant public—then he is creating ugliness because he fears the truth.

To any artist, worthy of the name, all in nature is beautiful, because his eyes, fearlessly accepting all exterior truth, read there, as in an open book, all the inner truth.

He has only to look into a human face in order to read there the soul within — not a feature deceives him; hypocrisy is as transparent as sincerity — the line of a forehead, the least lifting of a brow, the flash of an eye, reveal to him all the secrets of a heart.

Auguste Rodin

The Problem of Seeing and Drawing

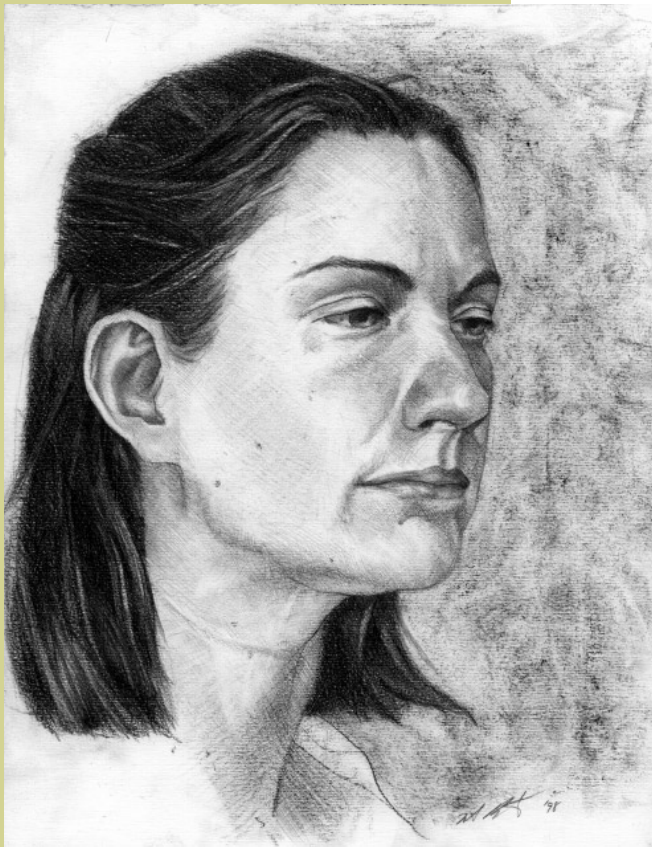


We all <u>*see*</u>, more or less, the same. It is our perception of what is seen that is the major stumbling block to drawing what we see. This stumbling block of perception is accepting ***<u>symbolic preconceptions</u>*** for what is really there. For various reasons, when we begin to draw we refuse to accept the reality of what we are looking at. A student will concentrate their gaze upon, say, a nose, conscientiously note every indentation and pore, scribble down a symbol of a nose then wonder what went wrong. Worse, still, a student will invest hours in a drawing, become more and more frustrated and eventually convince themselves that the drawing is correct and the model wrong!

These <u>*symbolic preconceptions*</u> are insidious. As children we subscribe to a universal code of symbols. Every child utilizes the same symbol for a tree, a flower, a person (big head, tiny body), etc. As adults we build and elaborate upon these symbols. In portrait drawing, students will render an eye according to this language of symbols. There is no deep meaning, other than clinical interest, in these symbols. They are simply a short-cut to seeing; paradigms, or models of experience, rather than the 'real'.

This problem of perception can be corrected with knowledge and training. The objective of this course is to employ a methodology that breaks down the human head to its simplest components and build-up to that glinting expression that first appealed to us.

Drawing the human head is no more, nor less, difficult than drawing an apple. We will begin with establishing the <u>*arabesque*</u> and the <u>*height/width ratio*</u> of that particular head. From there we will establish the major landmarks (the brow ridge, the base of the nose, the zygomatic arches and mastoid process) and, then, <u>*block-in*</u> the primary light/dark pattern. Once that is established, the *arabesque* is refined, the features placed, and then, and, only then, do we proceed with modeling the form.



Ellen – Profiling a Harsh Melancholia

The most poignant portraits are of those individuals who have been dealt a difficult hand in the great card game of life. Ellen immediately struck me as someone who has not found much joy in her lurching journey from crisis to crisis in the constant hope that happiness lurks around the next corner, only to find yet another door closing shut offering only a quick glimpse of blue skies and flower carpeted fields of peace and tranquility. Her game is Solitaire.

Cur, that I am, I found her futile floundering intriguing – a quiet repose of sad acceptance and loneliness, Ellen proffered an excellent study.



Portrait drawing embraces much, much more than the simple rendering of form and light. Compare the finished drawing to the photograph of Ellen. You'll notice a few differences. I drew the eyes smaller than they really are and closed them a bit; melancholia has an unslept, withdrawn quality. The nose is rendered ruddier and redder. The cheeks given a harsh edged quality. There is a marked physiology to sadness, especially depression.

Depression can also appear as a cold and angry melancholia; the ancient Greeks described it best – black bile.

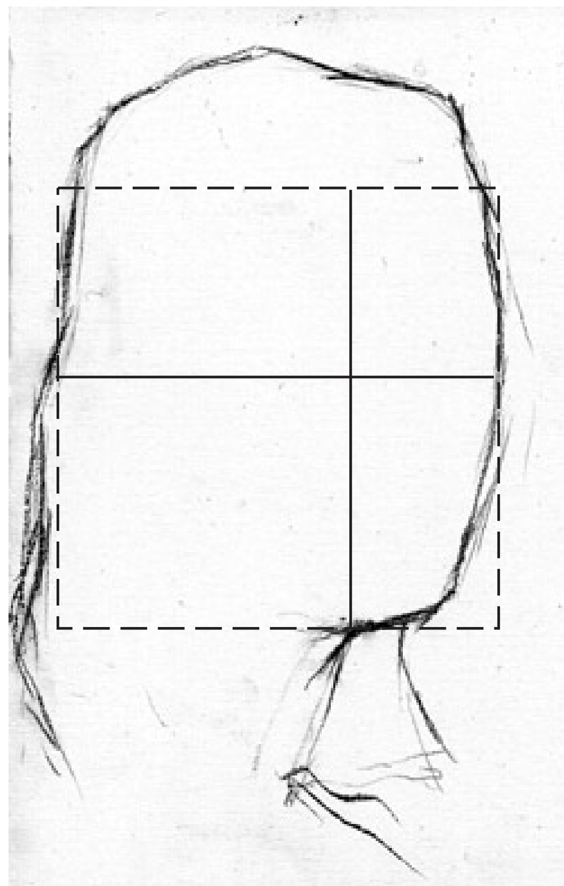
As artists our job is to interpret and opine – we are more than mere copyists.

Now, to work...



Quickly establish the arabesque. Slip in gunslinger mode, squint down your eyes and take your best shot.

Let's look more closely at the photograph of Ellen to ascertain the major proportions and to discover the unique qualities to Ellen's head.

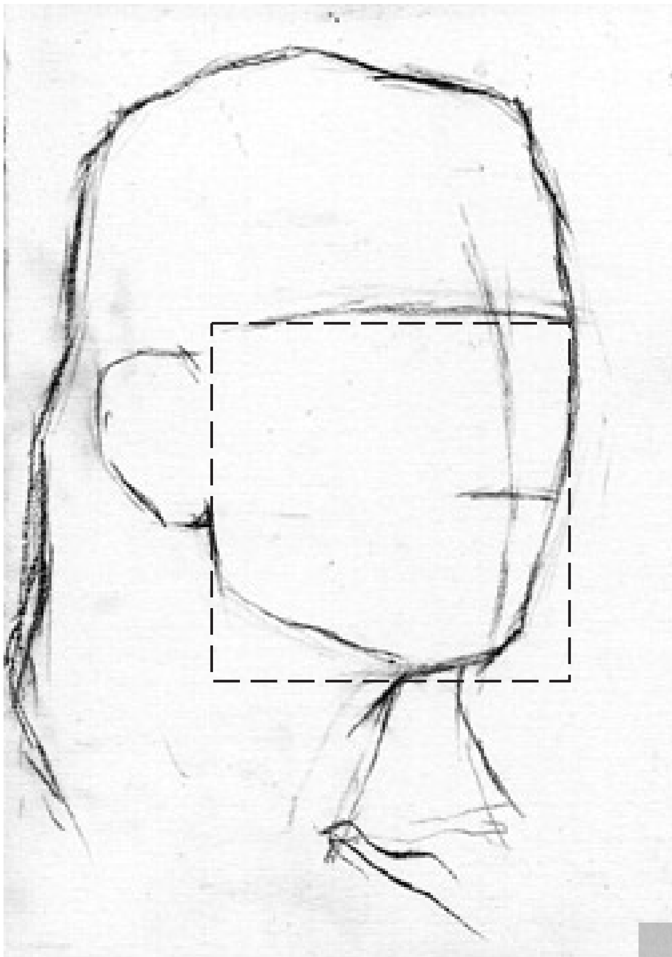


Well, isn't that interesting, the width of Ellen's head from the far zygomatic to the back of the hair is exactly equal from the intersection of sternohyoideus muscle and biventer mandibulae muscle to the top of the frontalis muscle, or frontal bone. (Let me reiterate – you really should know your anatomy. The portrait is a demanding subject that requires precision, knowing all of the lumps and bumps, their names and functions greatly aids in meeting the demands of accurate portrait drawing.)

Now is the time to check your proportions. I trust that you have taken your best stab at the gestural arabesque before checking your height to width proportions. That is how you train your eye.

My proportions are a bit off, but they're close enough for now.

I sense grumbling in the ranks. So my arabesque was not dead on. This isn't video, it's life. The gestural arabesque is only meant to break the tyranny of the blank page, remember? Let 's move on.



Ellen's brow ridge is just a little above the halfway point from the top of her hair to the mental process. The base of the nose is pretty much halfway between the brow ridge and the mental process. Note the center line of the face. In this 7/8's pose we are nearing profile, but not quite. I have encompassed the relationship of the denture and pyramidal nasi by arcing the center line outwards from the pyramidal nasi to the mental process.

As mentioned ad nauseum there is a structured order to everything. It is our role as artists to discover and embrace this order.



Once again, even in this 7/8's pose, the square is found encompassing the chin to brow and cheek to articular process, condyle (the back end of the jaw where the ear lobe meets).

This is a critical relationship. Double check your drawing to ensure that these proportions are present. If they're not, correct them by adjusting the width of the face (cheek to ear).

Switching Gears – Blocking In



... then stump



Drawing does not live by line alone. From the deep squint I quickly and roughly blocked in the large darks, including the large mass of hair.

Pay particular attention to the placement of the alar to the far cheek. It is directly aligned.

The placement of the mouth is a, more or less, wild guess. As usual, I placed the mouth too low. Not enough chin remains.

The emphasis of this initial blocking- in is as a rehearsal. Don't commit yourself at this point.

There are plenty of errors so far. Plenty of errors. Buckets of errors. But I digress.

As you stump, so, too, can you correct as you push the darks around. Use your fingers as paintbrushes to soften edges and the kneaded eraser to pick out the lights.

We are still working generally, but at this point the placement of the darks and lights should be more and more accurate. Double check your plumb-lines, especially the placement of the pyramidal nasi. It wouldn't be a bad idea to also check both the horizontal and vertical placement of the ear. Again.

... and back to the arabesque



With straight lines – straight, architecturally sound lines; lines that speak of structure – carefully refine the arabesque. I always work upwards from the hyoid when refining. If you are working from a photograph it will serve you well to invert the image and the drawing and refine the arabesque working upside down. This way you abstract the head and can better analyze the relationships of form and light without those nasty symbolic preconceptions getting in the way.

Incidentally, check the placement of the sternal notch. Everyone has the tendency to place it either too high or too low. The sternal notch is usually equal to the distance from the mental process to the upper alar.

Now the dough is mixed and it is time to bake the cake; we're ready to cook! (Mind you, my analogies take the cake all by themselves.)

You are now ready to sketch the arabesque of the nose. As previously discussed keep this arabesque simple and accurate. Size and placement are paramount. Don't forget to slip into gunslinger mode, use soft eye to better guage the overall proportion of the nose to the face while considering our tendency to draw tiny, symbolic noses. Most of us have big shnosses.

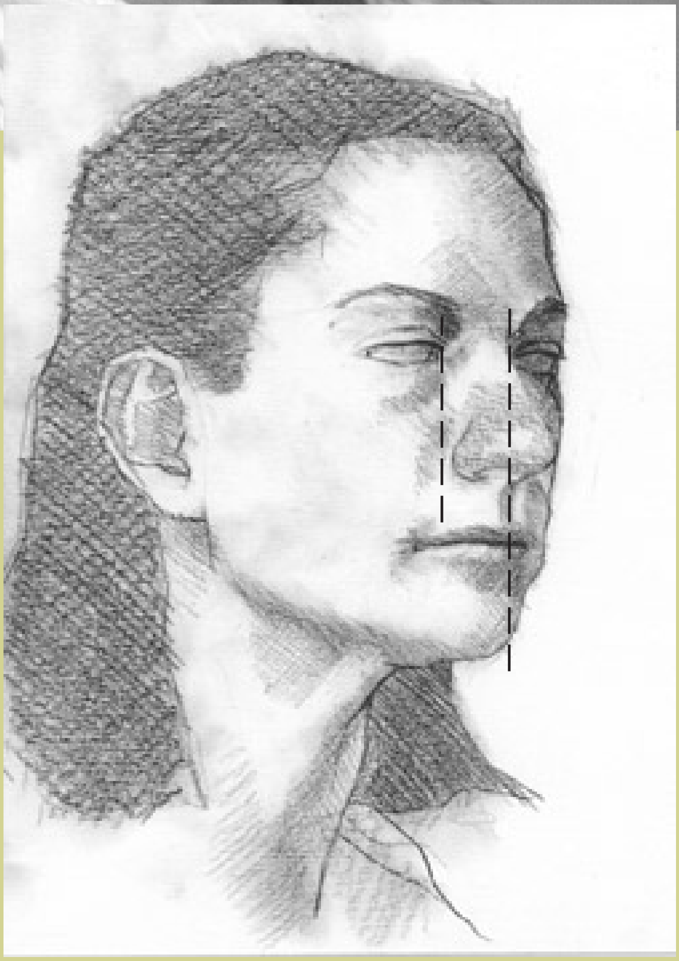


A closer look at Ellen

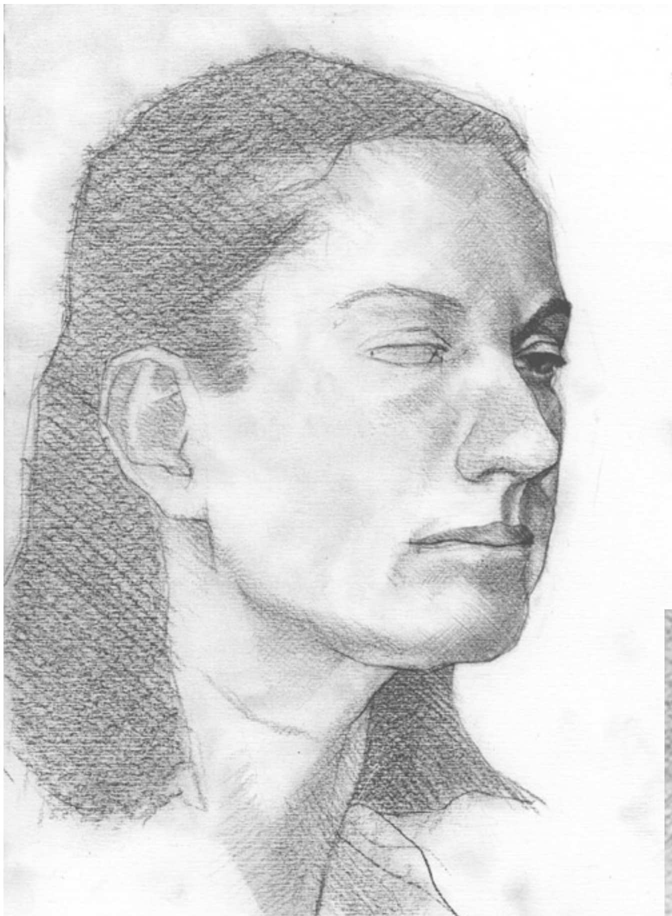
The placement of the nair and alae nasi of the nose is critical. Look for three reference points: first, the tip of the alar is aligned with the far cheek. Always, always check the placement of the nose relative to the far cheek. Miss this critical point and you've lost your head! (No pun intended, of course.) Second, plumbing down from the tear duct you immediately see that the eye is fairly recessed from the outer edge of the alae nasi. Third, the intersection of the root of the nose and the far eye is aligned with the philtrum and the mental process. Forget about the mouth for now.



If you have blocked in the light/dark pattern reasonably accurately, the features should snap into place. Clickety, clack! Just like a jigsaw puzzle. If you have to force a piece into place, and/or smack it in there with the heel of your shoe, then something is amiss. Check all of your major proportions again. Very likely you're brow ridge is misplaced; if that is the case, then also, your nose is out of joint, and most definitely, your mouth is misplaced. It is a dominoe effect.



Building Form – Cross Hatching



I prefer to begin with the far eye, building up the forms of tone by cross-hatching with a very sharp HB pencil. I very seldom stump at this stage, instead I define and meld my edges with the very fine lines of parallel strokes.

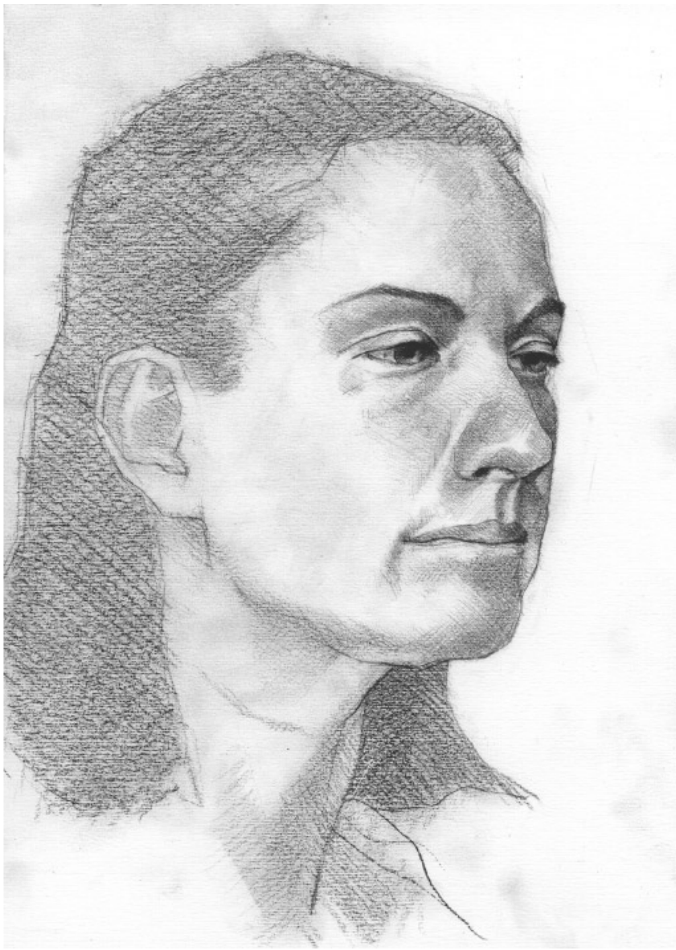
Building tone and form is the most meditative and satisfying part of portrait drawing. As with all things, a solid foundation is mandatory. An exquisite rendering of details will not hide a poor architectural structure, instead all of the errors and miscues of proportion will be made more apparent.

Don't be too upset if you have to correct the arabesque, again! There is no shame in correcting. Edgar Degas' friends felt compelled to hide his painting whenever he visited to keep Edgar from reworking his drawings and paintings. William Turner had the same urge; not only to rework his paintings but also those paintings of other artists displayed nearby.



Look closely at this eye, note how both the lower and upper eyelids wrap around and disappear behind the flattened far edge of the sclera. It is a very common error to render this eye as if seen frontally. Think back to the coffee mug analogy.

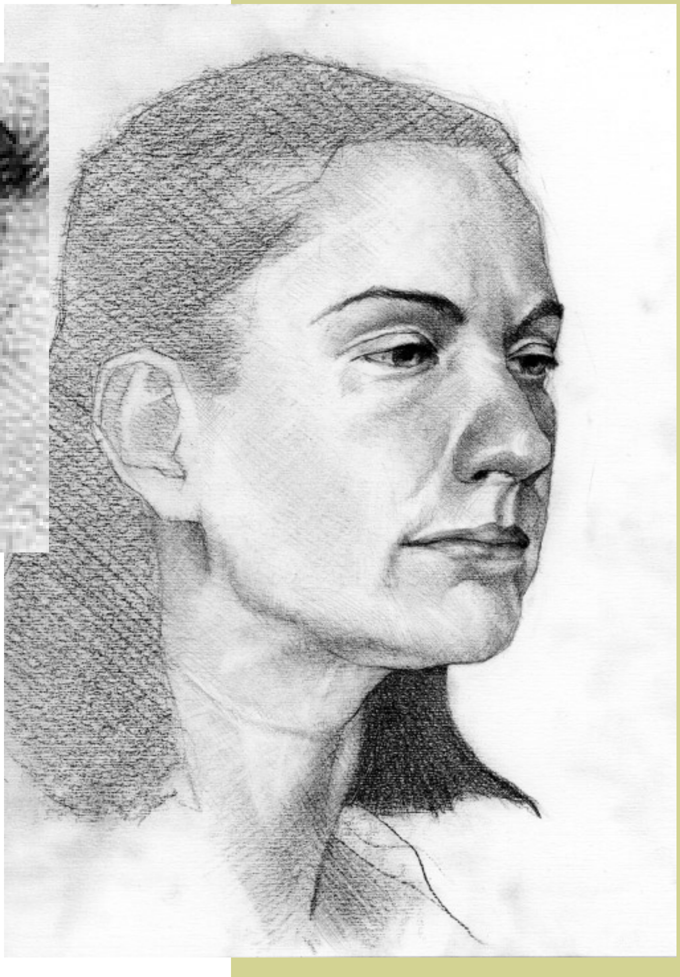
The same goes for the mouth. The mouth is cyndrical and wraps around the denture. I've yet to tackle the lower yet. Peas and carrots, peas and carrots.



The head is furthered modeled by cross-hatching, using a variety of pencil hardnesses. I usually begin with HB over the original 8B, then alternate with B for the darker tones and a 2H to delicately fuse the soft fluting edges the form shadows. A graphite blackened kneaded eraser (you know, the dirty ones at the bottom of your drawing kit that you used to toss out) is also utilized to cross hatch out the lighter values while building texture.

To further enhance the feeling of stoic sadness I rendered the nair and alar ruddier than they actually are. Colour sense can be expressed with graphite tone. Matisse was a master at this.





This eye also flattens out as it turns. The pupil is set back, off-center with a ragged edge. To better understand this, hold up a tea-cup saucer vertically and turn it to a 3/4's profile. The inner indented circle is no longer centered; just like the pupil in the soup bowl that is the iris.

Hair: Structure & Rhythm

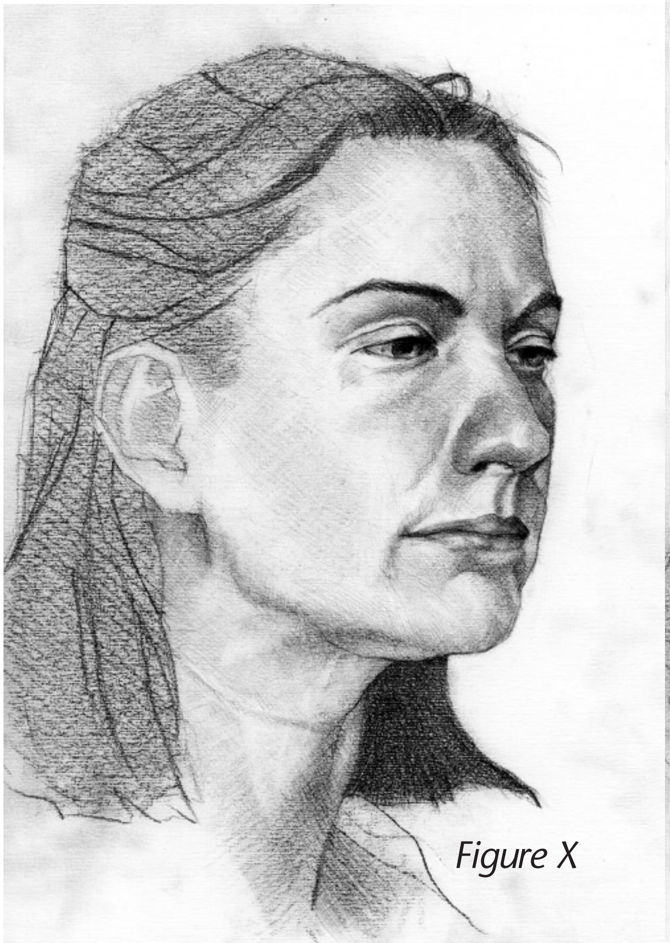


Figure X

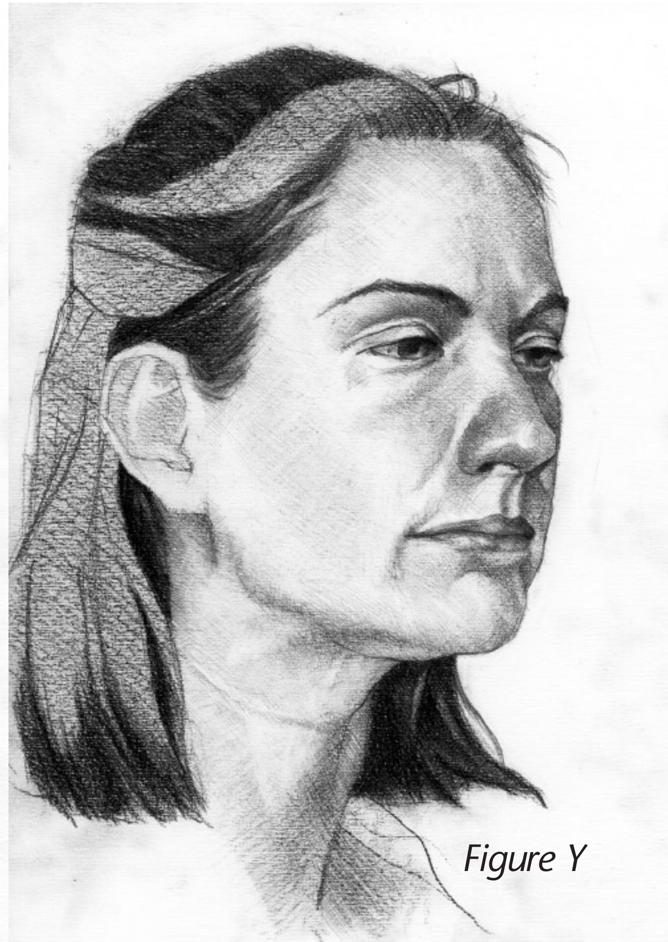
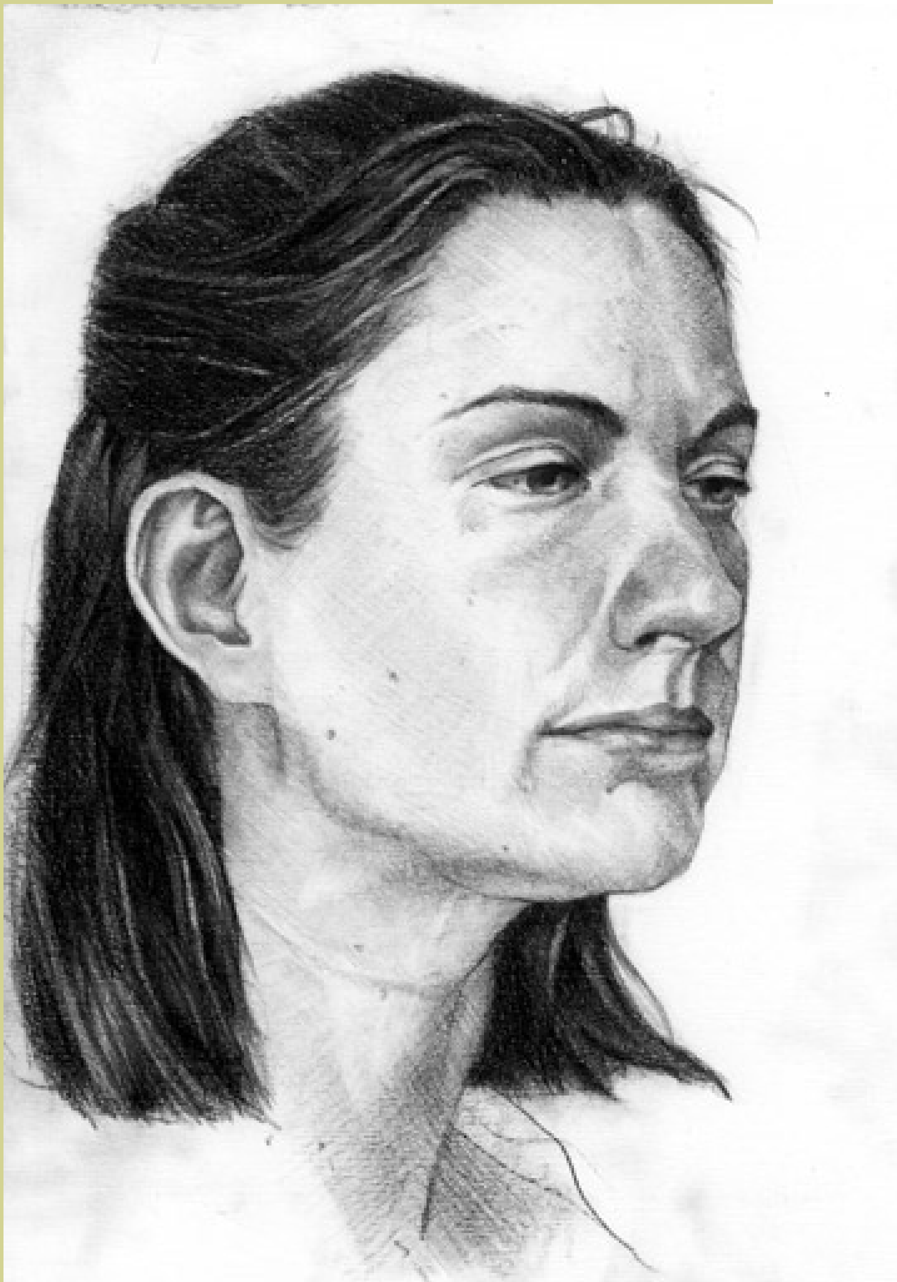


Figure Y

Hair is a nuisance, much like a disobedient child who never does what it is told. Most artists treat hair as if it were a distasteful chore, something to be promptly dispatched. Don't. The same care taken to develop the features should also be taken in the treatment of the hair. Enough said, now let's do it.

Hair, whether diligently coiffed or tangled into a shock of bewilderment – usually that early morning surprise and amazement at having survived the night has a defined structure and rhythm. Hair stylists are keenly aware of this (at least I hope that mine is). In Figure X I have divided the hair into its major locks, much like my hair stylist would do. Ellen's upper hair locks are swept back and tied at the back of her skull. The lower half of her hair fall and rest on the back of her neck.

In Figure Y the supporting locks are blocked in. My strokes are directed as if I were actually brushing Ellen's hair. Double mileage is attained here. Note the hair line at the temple, it is soft and transparent.



The remainder of the hair is blocked in with a few strands suggested by lifting out with a chisel-edged kneaded eraser. Avoid obviously parallel strands – parallel lines have no life.

There was a lot of additional cross-hatching, stumping and lifting out going on here. A grand time was had pushing form, striving to achieve the full stretch.

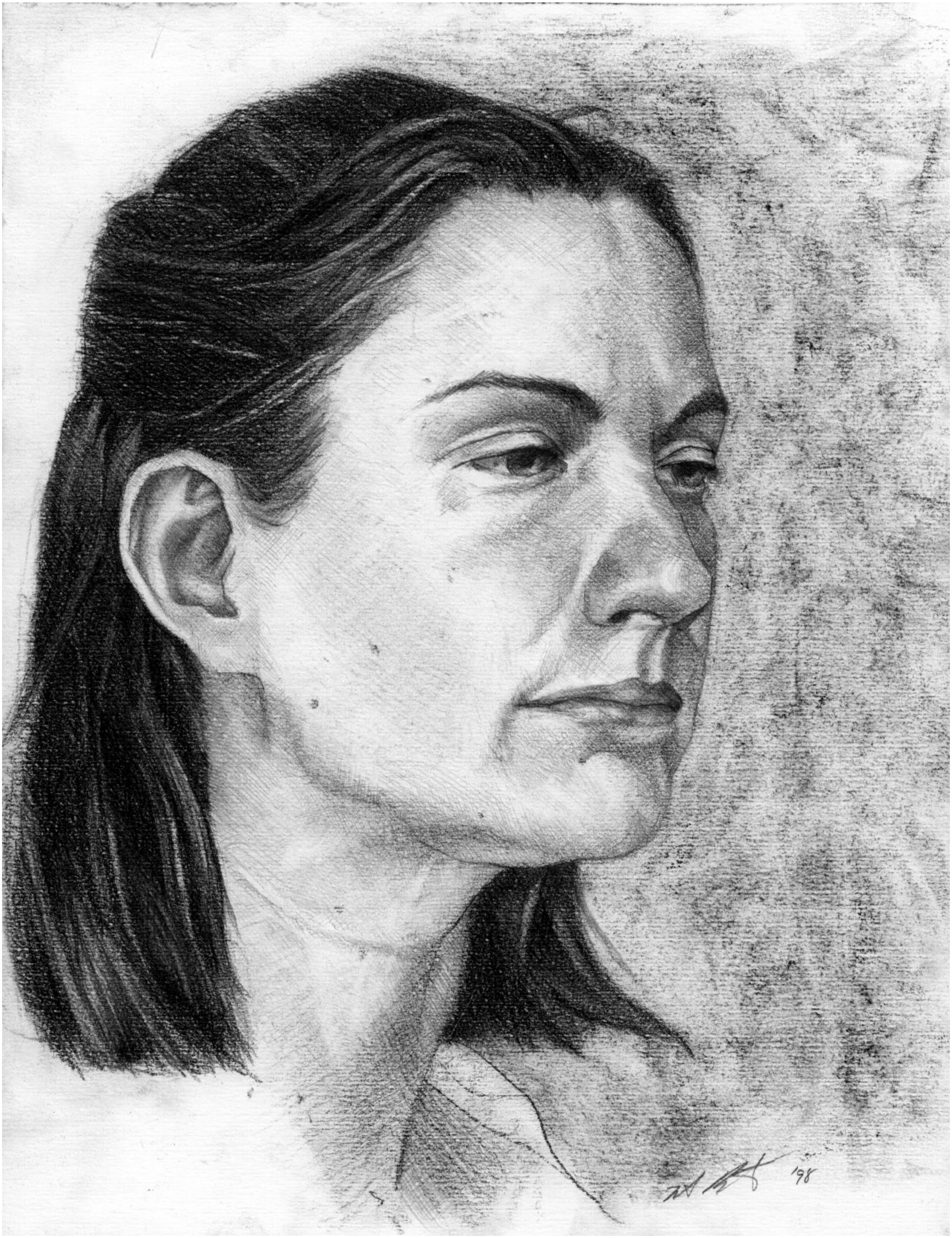
The ear was resolved at this time. Pop quiz! Point out the tragus.

As always, finishing is the most difficult and soul searing of our many tasks. We very seldom meet the goals set out for; instead we are left grasping and sullenly peering at our efforts with disdain. That is our lot. I think, in the end, this discouragement is a good thing. If you are always happy and crowing about your work then I would be concerned; you are probably not reaching out far enough and cheating only yourself.

Fully disgusted with myself, completely bereft of any talent or ability, yet gently savouring this moment of flagellation, I sense that this treatment of Ellen as a vignette does not completley work. The drawing requires grounding to articulate the feeling of melancholia initially strove for.

A background was blocked in with the long edge of a 4B graphite stick, stumped in and, finally, textured with painterly strokes of my kneaded eraser.

There. Done. Another sad soul to populate my kingdom.


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